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RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1414
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 6250
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000505

SENSITIVE
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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM ASEAN TH

SUBJECT: ASEAN SUMMIT SHOWDOWN: SECGEN SURIN CHALLENGES CIVIL SOCIETY TO HAVE A VOICE; OTHERS LOOK TO MUZZLE IT

REF: BANGKOK 504

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Classified By: Pol Counselor George Kent, reason 1.4 (b, d)

¶1. (C) Summary and Comment. The runup to the February 27-March 1 ASEAN Summit in Thailand has provided a fascinating window in the evolving nature of the ASEAN community, including efforts by some to give voice to ASEAN civil society and life to the ASEAN Charter, contrasted by efforts by others to prevent those same civil society representatives from having their voice heard. On one side stands a wide range of civil society groups, ASEAN Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan (a former Thai FM) and Thai leaders such as PM Abhisit and FM Kasit; on the other side are the Burmese, Lao, and Cambodian governments, as well as some mid-level Thai officials in the MFA and intelligence services.

¶2. (C) Surin challenged the 700 civil society representatives participating in the February 20-22 ASEAN FORUM to find their voice and hold their leaders accountable. On the eve of the planned follow-on February 28 ASEAN Civil Society-Leaders' dialogue, however, it remained unclear whether ten civil society representatives from the Forum would be allowed to engage the ten ASEAN leaders, or whether a single Thai academic would present a report on behalf of civil society - with the other representatives either prevented from participating by recalcitrant governments or deciding on their own to boycott the event out of sympathy for their blackballed Burmese counterparts. The eventual composition of the dialogue will prove an early litmus test of the implementation of the promise of the Charter, as well as the current balance between those in ASEAN who wish to give the peoples of ASEAN a real voice and those who wish to continue to ignore the views of their own people. End Summary and Comment.

"It is your turn now"

¶3. (SBU) In recognition of the importance of the launch of the ASEAN Charter during its year of chairmanship, Thailand decided to highlight the important role civil society plays as a primary theme of its ASEAN Chairmanship. The civil

unrest in Thailand the second half of 2008 -- including the occupation of Government House and Bangkok airports by a civil society protest movement -- postponed the Summit from December and tarnished Thailand's reputation. But a new government gave new life to the civil society agenda. Over 700 civil society representatives from nine of the ten ASEAN countries (none from Brunei) attended a lively and chaotic ASEAN Forum February 20-22 in Bangkok to discuss and debate a range of issues affecting the peoples of ASEAN. Billed as the largest ever ASEAN civil society gathering, the Forum featured opening and closing addresses by ASEAN SecGen Surin, joined by Thai FM Kasit Piromya for the closing.

¶14. (SBU) Surin discussed the importance of civil society in ASEAN, highlighted the importance of the newly opened space for civil society that was created under the ASEAN Charter, and stressed the responsibility of the peoples of ASEAN to fill it and hold their leaders accountable. Surin touched on Burma, stating that, with the Charter coming into force, every issue was now on the table. He also stated that the predicament of Rohingya migrants from Burma could not be ignored.

¶15. (SBU) For his part, FM Kasit stated that Thai civil society had become the third political force in Thai society, particularly in the past 15 years (note: in previous similar comments, Kasit has identified the traditional forces as military and monarchy. end note). Civil society was pushing Thailand to become more democratic. Kasit assured the audience that each of the members of the Thai cabinet would work hand-in-hand with civil society in a transparent manner.

¶16. (SBU) Surin said that the ASEAN Charter had opened up a wide space for the peoples of ASEAN. Without the "firm

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"pillar" of civil society, ASEAN would not be able to fully realize its goals. Challenging the civil society activists, Surin stated that civil society engagement was essential in order for ASEAN to live up to the ideals embodied in the Charter. Surin summed up his comments by stating that ASEAN was evolving into a rule- and law-based organization where leaders can be held accountable by the peoples of ASEAN; it was up to the people now to do so.

Subtext: Burma

¶17. (SBU) The unspoken subtext of many of the comments, and the stated topic of many spin-off seminars and events in the week leading up to the Leaders' Summit (reftel), was Burma. In addressing ASEAN's policy toward Burma, Surin explained that every issue was now on the table. Leaders in ASEAN were engaging with the Burmese, and the reality of ASEAN exchanges had gone beyond the "flexible engagement" Surin as Thai FM had proposed in 1998, only for it to be rejected by ASEAN FMs. Surin cited ASEAN's role in providing relief in Burma after cyclone Nargis and highlighted the strong public statement under Singapore's chairmanship regarding the Burmese government's 2007 crackdown on protesting monks.

¶18. (SBU) Surin commented that the plight of the Rohingya people who have fled from Burma could not be ignored and had to be approached from a regional perspective. Surin welcomed the idea of using the "Bali process," co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia, with the UNHCR and IOM as partner agencies.

Giving people a voice or silencing it?

¶19. (SBU) At the conclusion of the Forum, participants selected ten representatives to meet with the ten ASEAN leaders February 28 in a dialogue that Thailand was promoting as a highlight of the planned Summit. There were no representatives from Brunei or Laos, the former lacking any participants, and activists from the latter too fearful of

participating in a public session with the Lao leader. Khin Ohmar, a Burmese activist operating out of Mae Sot for Burma Partnership, was chosen as the Burma civil society representative, with Spokesperson for the National Council of the Union of Burma Soe Aung selected as the alternate, allowed to listen to the dialogue. However, their participation soon became a political football.

¶10. (C) Khin Ohmar told us February 26 that an official from the Thai MFA had approached her late February 25 to say that the two Thai based Burma activists could not participate in the event, and that she should withdraw; otherwise the SPDC officials would "walk out." Another MFA official had called her earlier to suggest that she was ineligible to participate due to her 1996 testimony in front of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Thai FM Kasit was furious when he heard this story, and had breakfast with Khin Ohmar, other Burma activists, and members of the ASEAN Interparliamentary Myanmar Caucus (AIPMC) February 26 to show support for them.

¶11. (C) At the conclusion of the Feb. 26 AIPMC seminar on the situation in Burma, as they were talking to us, Khin Ohmar and Soe Aung received calls from both Burmese and Mae Sot-based Thai intelligence officers telling them not to participate in the February 28 dialogue event. Caucus President, Thai MP, and Burma activist Kraisak Choonhaven subsequently took the Burma representatives and AIPMC MPs to meet Thai PM Abhisit. Khin Ohmar relayed the interchanges with working level MFA and intel reps to Abhisit. Abhisit acknowledged that dialogue participation was a "sensitive matter," but said that he would see her in Hua Hin. Kraisak advised Khin Ohmar to respond to future telephone harassment by intelligence agents by telling them to call him instead.

¶12. (C) The saga did not end there. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, head of the Thai branch of ISIS (Institute of Strategic and International Studies), which organized the three-day civil society ASEAN Forum and is slated to chair the Civil

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Society-Leaders' Dialogue February 28, told us late February 27 that he might end up presenting the results of the Forum alone. The Government of Burma continued to refuse to accept Khin Ohmar as a participant and was actively lobbying other governments in support, he said. Laos and Cambodia had agreed, with the Government of Cambodia also rejecting the Cambodian civil society representative from the ASEAN Forum and demanding that its hand-picked person represent Cambodia.

Thitinan said that he had heard Singapore was also wavering. For their part, Khin Ohmar told us February 27 that: "all of us are considering boycotting the event because the Thai MFA cannot choose civil society representatives for ASEAN events."

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